CHILDREN AND DISASTER

Dr. Dora Black focuses on the needs of children bereaved by the Bradford Football fire disaster.

Children are resilient creatures with great individual variability, and we no longer believe that early experience moulds a child's personality unchangeably, or that childhood trauma leads inevitably to later mental ill-health. Nevertheless the tragedies in Aberfan, Belfast and Israel have taught us that children exposed to disaster are twice as likely to develop psychological problems as others. What can we learn from the experiences of other communities that will help those children bereaved by the football fire disaster in Bradford?

In July I was privileged to be invited to the Study Day which the University of Bradford organised for those involved in the medical, nursing and social work care of the survivors of the fire. I heard many tales of courage—and of families bereft at one blow of all their menfolk. I heard of families still too shocked to begin the task of mourning; something we all have to do when someone we love dies if we are to remain healthy and do the jobs we still have before us—to rear our remaining children or complete our growing up and take a rightful place in society.

So how can we help those who were less intimately touched by a disaster which came into the houses of us all, and which left no Bradfordian (and indeed none of us) completely unmoved?

The answer is that we can help a great deal. We need to ensure that the children who lost fathers are being cared for by loving adults who can give them an opportunity to express their grief, can answer their questions, can encourage them to mourn, but also can give them permission to have a break from grief and the pain of others around them. Very often the remaining parent can and should be able to help—but to do this she must in her turn be cherished and supported and given help in mourning. Some of the mothers, though, bereft not only of husbands but fathers and sons too, may still be in a state of shock and may not yet be able to give expression to their own grief. For those families, others must help the children, if they are to be freed to continue their development.

The children who are given the opportunity to talk and cry about their dead father, recall the good (and bad) times they had together, make sense of their mother's grief, and be reassured that she continues to love them and that the whole community will care for them until mother feels better should cope with their loss. If they have lost siblings too—particularly if their relationship was a stormy one they may feel guilty about not feeling more sad about their disappearance. They need to know that such a reaction is normal. A few children, remembering that in the heat of battle they wished their brother or even their father were dead, may have a severe guilt reaction. The monitoring adult needs to be aware of this so the idea can be explored and gently repudiated.

Young children don't understand that death is irreversible, and may expect father or brother to return. As one six year old said to me, "When Dad went to Manchester he was back for tea. Is heaven much further away than Manchester, 'cos he's not back yet, and he went weeks ago?"

Bereaved teenagers, who in the normal way would be slowly moving out of the family, may find themselves drawn back in to comfort their mother, to parent younger siblings and help with household chores in a way which interferes with their own mourning and their progress to independence. Again it needs watching by the guardian adult.

Recently I looked at whether it would be helpful to bereaved children and teenagers if a social worker met with the whole family to help them to mourn together. We found that in those families we saw, the children were more likely to be functioning well a year after the bereavement, than a similar group in which we did not intervene.

Fortunately in Bradford the response from the helping professions has been generous, prompt and knowledgeable, and I am confident that the children of this disaster will be protected from harm as much as is possible.

(continued from page 29)

lead to a heightening of the isolation that the bereaved may already experience.

Full incorporation of the bereaved back into the community is parallel to the final phase of grief work. We are therefore thinking in terms of a period of time nearer to eighteen months than the two or three months that people usually allow. Attempts to hurry the process are often an expression of our anxiety and embarrassment in the face of grief. A difficulty that faces many people in our society is the lack of a structure within which to do their grief work, and which would mark off the end of grief—as exists within the Jewish community.

In the absence of a structure the bereaved will look to various key people in the community for guidance as to whether certain actions are deemed acceptable or unacceptable and when grief may be officially 'ended' in the sense that it is all right to socialise. A young widow who wished to remarry sought the approval of the local community in case she should be censured later for marrying "before her first was cold in t'grave".

People may, therefore, turn to the G.P. or local clergy for "permission" to stop grieving, especially around the anniversary. Continued visiting and the support offered by organisations such as Cruse, Stillbirth & Perinatal Death Association, and the Compassionate Friends (for bereaved parents) can all assist incorporation. They may also be able to identify when people are using their religious faith in a stoical way, such that they deny any grief feelings: e.g. "I believe in God and an after-life. Therefore, I should be happy that my husband is with God So I shall smile and show the world how Christians face bereavement. If I cry and grieve that will indicate a lack of faith". It is not a case of letting God down but of being fully human, as exemplified by Jesus' distress at the death of Lazarus. Often the clergyman is seen as someone who will support the mourner in such a stoical stance. The clergyman may therefore have the difficult job of challenging this way of coping with loss.

CONCLUSION

Religion and culture can offer tremendous support and comfort to people in sorrow, provided it is a mature belief and a supportive and relevant ritual. We cannot know all the intricacies of another faith and not all adherents will be equally strict in their practice. However, if we can attend to our own assumptions about other people and give full value to what they wish to do, plus the space in which to do it, we will be able to facilitate their grieving—and learn much ourselves.